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# A CONJECTURE OF INTENSIVE FICTION

BY W. D. HOWELLS

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**THE** theorist of intensive fiction must first make reasonably sure that there is such a thing, and when he has done this he must show the reader that it differs from extensive fiction, if he can. Instead, I had proposed to take the first proposition for granted, and then to suppose that the second was a matter of universal knowledge. With such an easy scheme it was quite as simple to inquire who had shown the greatest mastery of intensive fiction, and it was logical to believe that women had shown the same superiority in it as in gardening, say, while men had excelled in the more extensive forms of imaginative literature as in farming. At the same time, it would be candid to leave the whole question in a solution of reasonable doubt whether there was any such literary thing as intensive fiction and to hold one's self ready to renounce one's theory of it. I was moved, somewhat elatedly, to this conclusion by remembering that the most delightful of women novelists allows her most delicately ironical character to question the equally undisputed opinion that "the talent of writing agreeable letters is peculiarly feminine . . . As far as I have had opportunity of judging," Henry Tilney says, "it appears to me that the usual style of letter-writing among women is faultless, except in three particulars. . . . A general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar."

Tilney's wit does not pass upon the question of woman's superiority in gardening which had not come up, and I had taken her excellence for granted because the robuster energies of man were more adapted to farming. Woman, I reasoned, is naturally fitted for the intensive culture of a small space of ground, from which by thoroughly enriching and tilling it she can garner the results of a very much larger

area, a quite indefinitely larger area. In fiction by the same treatment of a very limited area of life she could make it yield a harvest as great as a large-sized plot under cultivation by the extensive method. My notion was in fact that women being gardeners rather than farmers by instinct, and more used than men to make the most of a little, would use a few characters, or a few groups of them, to get the effect of a vast dramatic scheme, peopled with a multitude of types. The more I considered this notion the more it pleased me, and I began casting about for instances which would prove it when the cool breath of Tilney's satire smote upon me and chilled the ardor of my supposition. I was going to allege the work of Jane Austen herself as a prime instance of the superior feminine intensiveness in fiction, and I confess that I felt badly to have a main proof of it turned against me as it were by her own hand. Yet what better proof of her own intensiveness in fiction could there be than *Pride and Prejudice*, *Persuasion*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Emma*, not to name her other books? Or, if I must go further back in time, where should I find more convincing evidence of woman's excelling intensiveness in fiction than in the novels of Miss Edgeworth? Or, if I come forward in time, what supream instance than in the novels of Charlotte Brontë, who confessedly thought so little of Jane Austen's fiction and probably of Maria Edgeworth's, though she applied in her own work the intensive methods which these authors supremely exemplified. Woman's excellence in intensive fiction was evinced not only by their creative work but by the instructive effect of it, for they seemed to have taught man that very mastery of the art which would seem to tell against my position. Their example did not stop with the limits of the English language and life; all over Europe it wrought, and in *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karénina*, the novels of Björnsen and the plays of Ibsen; in such stories of the Spaniards as Valdis's *Maximina*, Ibañez's *La Catedral* and *Sangre y Arena*, and beyond all the rest Galdós's *Doña Perfecta*. No doubt others could name women who excel these men in the intensiveness of their fiction; but as it is I can think only of Pardo-Bazán in *The Angular Stone*, and in *Homesickness*. To recur to the Russians, I may cite all the novels of Turgenieff as illustrative of my meaning: *Smoke*, *Spring-Floods*, *Lisa*, *Father*, and *Sons* are insurpassably intensive. Among Americans I

think first of Hawthorne, and *The Scarlet Letter*, and *The Marble Faun*.

None of these masterpieces, whether of women or men, tell a story, or invent a plot so much as divine the feelings and portray the character of one person in dramatic encounter with a very few other persons. Out of the limited circumstances they gather a harvest richer than the many-acred yield of the vast and wandering field of romance. This is saying it very imperfectly, and perhaps the difference between the two kinds cannot be definitely stated, but can only be felt by the few who are able to feel things of themselves and need not be told what they feel. In later American fiction I think of no example so illustrative of the intensive method as Mr. Booth Tarkington's *Turmoil*. There the action and its implications are kept wholly within two families and their few acquaintances, yet in this small area of character a world of social and psychological import is felt. The scene is always a Middle-Western manufacturing city such as twenty years ago, when polite people who were vainly striving against the greatness of Ibsen, would have been called provincial, but now, with all its qualities insistent, it must be recognized as of the same metropolitan value as Paris or London. The scene is ample for the most important human events and the passions stalk as large there as if they had the world for their theatre.

It is the advantage of the intensive method of fiction that its scene is never cluttered, but when the interests are apparently the simplest and the events the fewest, the stage is never empty. If the characters have their feet on the ground, it is enough; we know them living and feel them real. Take such a story as Miss Sarah N. Cleghorn's story of *The Spinster*, which is no more than the life of a girl growing up in the New England hill-country to be an old maid and continuing the fulfillment of her destiny by way of Radcliffe College in Cambridge. This is finally accomplished among the women-workers on strike in New York, where the spinster joyfully finds herself a socialist. The book is tense with emotion, animated by an unbroken strain of reality, of truth to Puritanic origins throughout the modern circumstance of the story. It is a very touching story which keeps the heart of womanhood palpitant through disappointment from the first stirring of the girlish wish to be desired to the last throe of celibate resignation in devo-

tion to a great, just cause. The New England conscience will not suffer the author to falsify character or misrepresent life, any more than to tell or act any other kind of lie. The heroine is herself very romantic, or rather poetic; life is a dream, a rapture undisguised with her, and in the end an ecstasy of unselfish love for all the poor of the world. Those ultimate chapters where the heroine—truly heroic—is seen turning from the egotism of our actual conditions to the altruism of the world as it shall be, are of thrilling beauty in their simplicity.

The literary method throughout is intensive; there is no waste of the narrow ground; every space is made to grow from life something life-giving. The very pang that the story imparts at times, perhaps most times, is vitalizing; one cannot read such a story without a sense of nourishment such as the fodder from the unlimited acreages of the extensive method cannot impart. It is of the tradition in which most American women-novelists have excelled and have surpassed the American men-novelists; and in the same tradition the women-novelists of England have won their triumphs. There is of course the great, the only George Eliot, who is of the extensive school, but a good deal might be said to show that it is when she gathers her forces into some little nook or corner of one of her wide areas that she is greatest. The novel that first made her universally known, *Adam Bede*, might be fairly claimed as the effect of the intensive method; and all the rest of the novel-writing English women are of that cult. Especially so is that novelist who, upon the whole, must stand next to Jane Austen, and whose method was always an instinct with her, but was perverted at times by the Victorian taste which she perforce addressed, for Charlotte Brontë, far beyond the extensive novelists of her time, lived the truth, and loved the look of life, and desired to tell it and to give it perhaps most when she most failed of it.

The reader experienced in my heterodoxy (as it would once rather than now be accounted) will perceive the slant of this, and will not be deceived by my talk of the intensive method. He will know that I mean romanticism when I speak of the extensive method in fiction, and will be by no means misled by my praise of the intensive fiction of an English authoress whose novels I have been learning to like during some years past, and whom I wish I could praise to a

public here more conversant with them than I can make sure of. It was in fact from the intensiveness of one of her latest-read, though not latest-written novels, that I was moved to imagine the existence of such a method in fiction and the priority of women in it. But no example in any art is scientifically perfect, and *Una and the Lions* by Constance Smedley, as she calls herself, is not so exemplary as I could wish an example of intensive fiction to be; it is not a human drama of that greatness which the harvest from an intensively cultivated plot should be. It is the autobiographically told story of a young English girl, a teacher, who gets to Florence by a stroke of ludicrous good luck, and sees the foreign society-world there through and from the finely graded and differenced snobbishness of the lady-boarders in a genteel pension. It is her practical ignorance and instinctive knowledge of their natures which animate the scene while the certain never-fully-revealed awfulness of a very wicked old English lord, as learned as he is lurid, living in the iniquity tolerated by the easy-going society of the Italian capital, is the darkling background of the stage. The drama is the play of the girl's emotions in the presence of the city's artistic and historic wonders, and the events are her mostly subjective experiences. There is a beginning and a middle and an ending but nothing transcends the autobiographical frame, which is made to include so much that is not autobiographical: a world, indeed, of undreamed-of persons and motives. The spare incident is intensively used and there is a crop of character grown in the narrow plot of life which the extensive method would have left with a surface scarcely touched.

But as an example of what may be done by the intensive method it is not so satisfactory as the author's later book, *On the Fighting Line*. Here again the form is autobiographical, and the supposed autobiographer is again a young girl, generous, glowingly imaginative and ardently trustful of the creatures of her imagination. But the scene now is in London, where the heroine is a typist very hard at work in the office of a rather adventurous financiering company. It is the necessity of her being to idealize some one, and the nearest at hand is the son of her official chief, sufficiently idealizable in his good looks and good nature and willingness to let her be in love with him. This part of it is the least interesting, the least valuable; the best part is that which

has to do with the people on the fighting line, the hard working men and women who while they struggle for a livelihood struggle to keep their souls their own. All are socialistic; some of the women are suffragettes, and at least one is militant; some are harmlessly Bohemian, like the autobiographer, and there are some creatures of the society world who feel the charm of this blithe unsociety world of work and freedom. The intensiveness of the book consists in producing from a few characters and events, results that the extensive method labors for over areas which touch one another only in episodes forcibly rather than voluntarily related. It is not so fresh an inquiry as the Florentine story, and after a moment of valuing it more as a contribution to the story of strenuous and conscientious endeavor in the world of work which tries also to be the world of play, one ends in valuing it less. The interest which centers in the Florentine pension, with the dilettantes in their periphery of aesthetic and historic inquiry, is more convincing of reality, more palpable than the London conditioning of the typist who loses her job by defeating the fraudulent intention of one of her employers. A good and true thing is the essential amicability of this rascal who takes her back into his employ with a half confession and apology when it serves his turn. What is best in it is what is best in the Florentine story, that is to say the autobiographer's girl-nature. You are not always convinced that the things happened, but if they had, this is the way that this sort of girl would have behaved in their occurrence.

The autobiographer who reveals herself is not so convincing as the girl studied in *The Spinster*, and there is not so much convincingness in the events. This may be partly or largely the result in such a witness as myself, because I know the ground better in the American book. But if this is so, I cannot very well say why one of Constance Smedley's other books persuades me of greater reality, greater actuality than the two I have been talking about. I am only certain that I am more certain of the people in *Commoners' Rights*. What is supposed to happen there happens in the little, inflexibly traditioned community of Chippingdun, where the young Gloucestershire squire bursts the bonds of immemorial conformity and marries the beautiful, brilliantly practical and generously idealistic daughter of professional people who has been in the management of a sort of co-opera-

tive art enterprise in London where she has personally sold the work of a Guild of Women Craft-workers. She has gloriously succeeded in this and is beloved and honored by the sisterhood she has benefited, but she has handled money like a shop-woman, and has already been made to feel, obscurely but unmistakably, that she is of the class which she has otherwise transcended. It is not to ease her heart of this pain that she has married the young squire, but it is a quality of her happiness in marrying him for love. He is good, a gentleman of the finest Tory breed, but Chippingdun is his world beyond every other, and her London achievement is something that he endures bravely and proudly, but something that at its best he wishes left behind her, with all its implications. He has no personal conceit, but he cannot imagine that it cannot be enough for her to be his wife and to share his place in the first rank of Chippingdun society. They come home from their wedding journey at the moment when the question of *Commoners' Rights* has arisen between the people and a firm of stone-quarriers who have infringed immemorial privilege by passing the bounds of the squire's land and taking the turf off a few yards of pasturage sacred to the villagers' cattle. The squire himself does not like that, and submits rather than consents to the action of the father and son who have hired their quarry from him. He goes to Canada on business and his wife is left with a retro-active jealousy of a very odious aristocrat whom he was in love with before his marriage. She indulges her humanitarian passion by espousing the cause of the commoners against the quarriers; and the whole case is treated with admirable justice. The gentry of Chippingdun whom the wife has disliked from her own tradition show unexpectedly well, and the lower classes are the first to believe a scandal against her and to disable her efforts for them. But the plot does not matter and the situation matters only as it enables character to show itself. The reader shall go to the book with the edge of such curiosity as he has unblunted; it is quite worth satisfying at first hand. What may be said in anticipation of his conclusion is to the praise of the very clear and generous equity shown in the inquiry. The whole affair is delicately as well as distinctly felt, and the effect is something very new, if not quite new, in the fiction which deals with character as shaped by tradition. There is no *parti pris* except the part of truth and fairness. The



reader's sympathy is with the under-dog, but the under-dog has confessedly his demerits, and the over-dog confessedly his good points. The commoners who are striving so bravely to keep the common from the landlords are shown to have unworthily kept it very dirty and even dangerous. The management of the situation is dramatic and not sensibly didactic, and it teaches, by character and event, as life teaches. Like life it is subtle, but as Lowell liked saying of Shakespeare's subtlety, it is subtle in letters a foot high.

There is no difficulty in identifying the method as intensive if there is any necessity. There is no waste ground, and the culture is close and fine, so that there is nothing lost in the sense imparted of the place and people. It is an excellent piece of work; it would have been called in earlier days a "contribution" to the social knowledge of an English neighborhood where none of the people are either so good or so bad as they are in the habit of thinking themselves and one another. The beautiful success of the heroine in the service of the Women Craft-workers in London is antecedent of the story and is less of the reader's experience and observance in fiction, if not out of it, than the social contacts of rich and poor at Chippingdun. We are more accustomed to meeting such people as are shown us there, than those *On the Fighting Line*, but it is not this, we think, that makes them more appreciable. The like social encounter is studied in another book of the authoress called *New Wine in Old Bottles*, a title which intimates the same sort of enmities and amenities in their activity, but here the facts are not so subtle or so freshly dealt with. There is a breadth in the personification of the different social elements which has rather too much of travesty; there is a want of the restraint which would have better convinced the reader of them, and there is an almost Victorian openness in the characterization; the people are too obvious from the outset. You are obliged too often to say, "No, this did not happen, or if it did, not in this way, or so soon." The scheme is very simple: a brother and sister who have lived nearly their whole lives in Italy, come back to their native country town of Scroose, in Gloucestershire, and try to resume their family importance which has been forfeited by their Italian mother's neglect of English etiquette. But they are not in sympathy with the local traditions of class; they have become socialists, in a way; they have a contempt for the people embodying those

traditions, and they show it in their wish to serve the town without the help of the town's betters. They wish the town to help itself; Miss Valentine plans a pageant exemplifying its growth in civilization through incidents of its industrial history, and she plans letting the people do the pageant themselves in the various characters. She soon feels the need of class favor and patronage; but when she calls upon the ladies of the chief family they snub her unsparingly and utterly refuse their countenance to her scheme. She is a person whom nothing can keep snubbed, and almost immediately the daughter of this topping house meets the brother who is writing the scenario of the pageant, and they fall in love with each other through their common love of poetry. This does not prevent the girl's being a hateful, though gifted person, and she has a cruel pleasure in taking a chief character in the pageant away from a daughter of trade to whom it has been assigned by the inventor of the pageant. The brave, unsnubbable girl assents perforce to the change and to the other changes made by the gentry who have come into the scheme, and to whom the tradesfolks' feelings are mud. Their action takes the best parts from the lower classes and gives one to the hateful gifted girl's brother, who by now is beginning to be in love with Miss Valentine, but not so far as to imagine her feelings in the case, or realize her sacrifices. What manliness is in him, the manliness which surpasses gentlemanliness, appears under the crucial ordeal of Richard Valentine's setting up a shop. To be sure the shop deals in such aesthetic wares as books, pictures, little sculptures and bric-a-brac; but Richard proposes to sell them over the counter himself, and that is a real test of Beverley's manliness.

Of the two intensive studies of the English social conditions *Commoners' Rights* is solidier and closer than *New Wine in Old Bottles* and more real. The last is in fact a sort of fantasy with the portrayal of personal character carried to the verge of caricature by insistence upon the traits of the types; the first is intensive fiction of prime excellence, and I could almost allege it as a supreme example. The people in it are of genuine quality and value; and it is worthy permanent survival from the multitude of dead and dying novels of our day. But this is not criticism, and I should like to refine upon my crudity, if I can, by saying that the book abounds in surprises for the reader

which will convince his reason, and keep his interest keen after the story is told. You expect that Georgiana with her socialistic and co-operative experience will achieve a moral triumph over her Tory husband which will give the hope of permanent change in his nature and that of Chippingdun generally. But this is not the result; the good end comes about through the reasonableness in the Tories which helps them to see clearly, point after point, and to deal justly. I should have to tell the whole story to prove this, and I must ask the reader to take my word for it, and to believe me without further proof that this admirable fiction is one of the best of the intensive sort which goes deeper and deeper in the production of its harvest from a narrow plot of life. A real question of duty, of the essential fraternity underlying every community is what enlarges and elevates the conduct of Chippingdun almost without changing the intention of its gentry, who are like gentry everywhere in proposing to make Christian charity do duty for the human solidarity.

Of course the book's essence is socialistic if not socialism; the thinking and feeling are socialistic; this is the beginning of it as much as it is the end of Miss Cleghorn's story of *The Spinster*. The two books are illustrative of the different English and American sense of the impulse stirring the civilized world. The English novelist recognizes it as a matter of taste; inequality, economical and social, is ugly, and the revolt against it is from the love of beauty. The American novelist feels it as the only right conclusion shaping the life of a generous, poetic woman-nature to its fit climax. Both books are intensive in method; but the American book is more poignantly intense; the suffering in it is the pang of a soul heroic in disappointment and sorrow. Naturally the situation is more appreciable to an American, because an American has witnessed the like in the life he has seen if not lived. It is vitally personal; the appeal of the English book is from the first to that social conscience which the American book reaches only in its culmination.

I think it is interesting to note how fiction has arrived through sympathy with the under-dog at criticism of an animal that might well have begun to believe itself impeccable through suffering. Sympathy with it has been characteristic of intensive fiction from the beginning, especially the intensive fiction of woman. Jane Austen herself who

relinquished a certain plot because the protagonist was too plebeian to have a rightful claim to the interest of cultivated people, or people of class, had yet an abhorrence of upper class arrogance, and she made her dearest heroine the daughter of a family only half gentry; and when we come to the next greatest woman writer of fiction, in the order of time after her, we are made to feel the sympathy of Charlotte Brontë as a passion that passes compassion, and thrills for reparation. The dog that she pities almost with tears of blood is not merely the social under-dog; all creatures that suffer wrong of whatever sort share her anguish of pity. A more controlled pathos is as penetrating in Miss Cleg-horn's story which carries its consolation with it. That is indeed a tragedy imparting a very "noble terror," and in the best sense of my conjecture it is intensive.

Yet none of these modern fictions begins to be so intensive as *The Scarlet Letter* and *Blithedale Romance*, or so responsive to my ill-defined ideal of that method. I have rather an uneasy conscience in having so defined it as perhaps to have left the reader with the impression that I always value it beyond the extensive method. In the hands of a master the intensive fiction more nearly approaches the drama, perhaps because its limit obliges it to be more explicit and direct, but I am not sure that the Laocoön is greater art than some classic bas-reliefs such as Schlegel liked to liken to epics. I am very sure that no fictions of the intensive method excel the masterpieces of extensiveness. Perhaps if I were to be very, very candid I might own that the greatest fictions are of the extensive method: *Don Quixote*, for instance, *Gil Blas*, *La Chartreuse de Parme*, *War and Peace*, *Middlemarch*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and perhaps *Vanity Fair* and *Wilhelm Meister*. But it may be contended that these are composed of agglutinated episodes which are separately of the intensive method. Of this method I should like to allege some of Zola's novels, and that very great recent Spanish novel by Ibañez, namely *La Catedral*, which is so narrowly defined that it never passes the ecclesiastical and economical and social limits of the Cathedral of Toledo from which it garners the whole significance of modern Spain. Of course *Marie Claire* must be counted among the foremost of intensive fictions, and Miss Edith Wyatt's beautiful and distinctively humane novel, *True Love*. One cannot read that book without great hope

and consolation, a harvest of faith in the rich possibilities of the democratic, the American ideal.

This recalls me from whatever wandering I have permitted myself in quest of examples and renews my wish to make clear somehow **what** I mean by intensive fiction; but I am not sure that I can do it. I do not mean a method which produces from a little space the effects of the largest extensive fiction, appreciable numerically, but perhaps a result in the reader which he could not compute as the sum of incidents or characters. It would be a method which should leave abidingly with him a sense of things far transcending the things related. There is perhaps something not finally explicable in this, something mystical, something curiously subjective, which I may suggest by the relation of an experience which I have so often had from my reading of fiction. I find myself carrying from the recollection of a strongly impressive passage a sense of spaciousness which does not correspond with the facts. This would seem to have occupied in statement and treatment several paragraphs, and even pages, but when I recurred to the book I would see that my impression had come from perhaps a few sentences. This exposition of what I mean by intensive fiction does not satisfy me, but I have some hopes that the reader will be less difficult, less exacting, and will be persuaded to bring a more sympathetic intelligence to my conjecturing than I have done.

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